

Iwu's Coronation Plans

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By Okey Ndibe

Maurice Iwu, who heads Nigeria's electoral commission, is sounding like a man determined to scuttle any gubernatorial election in Anambra State. He seems hell bent on conducting a coronation instead.

Last week, Iwu, a professor of pharmacy who is facing serious questions about the authenticity of his bachelor's degree, announced names of candidates his commission has approved for the elections. His list was telling for the names it excluded. For the presidential election, the commission erased the name of Vice President Atiku Abubakar, a man who has for two years warred ceaselessly with President Olusegun Obasanjo.

Interestingly, Atiku's name was omitted just hours after a court declared that the electoral commission did not have the mandate to screen or disqualify any candidates. Iwu's commission seemed far from impressed by the vice president's legal triumph. The commission apparently answers to an authority higher than the nation's courts, namely, the president. It is no secret that Obasanjo wants his estranged vice president sentenced to political hegira.

Even so, in one of the curious twists of Nigerian politics, Obasanjo's machinations have had the ironic effect of making Atiku look good. The president is so widely and deeply despised that many people who otherwise would have

discredited Atiku on account of his participation in Obasanjo's eight-year-long ruinous regime have, instead, sometimes seen the vice president as something of a blameless outsider.

If Iwu's effort to rusticate Atiku is in keeping with the president's desire, his purported disqualification of all serious gubernatorial candidates in Anambra serves as the surest sign yet that the electoral boss is a dangerous man as far as the nation's democratic aspirations are concerned. With one swing of the axe, the commission sought to incapacitate both incumbent Governor Peter Obi and ex-Governor Chris Ngige.

{mosgoogle} Should that action be permitted to stand, then Iwu would have cleared the path for Emmanuel Nnamdi Uba, the PDP's governorship candidate and the president's erstwhile Man Friday, to coast to a virtually uncontested victory. That outcome may be good for Iwu, a man reported to owe his nomination to Uba's recommendation, but it would be a disaster for Anambra in particular and, more broadly, for democratic ethos.

Why is the commission in such haste to block the two men widely regarded as tested hands, and whose academic and other credentials far surpass Uba's in every department that counts? Iwu's ostensible reason is legalistic. "As far as the commission is concerned," said Iwu, "Ngige does not have any legitimate

affidavit and nomination to enable him contest the 2007 elections” [sic]. He said that Ngige had failed to swear an affidavit at a (Nigerian) state high court, thus invalidating his papers. On Obi, Iwu said the commission was constrained by an injunction obtained by the Chekwes Okorie faction of the governor’s party.

That’s as far as the public reasons go. My understanding is that Ngige, who spent several months in the U.S. following his ouster as governor, swore an affidavit at a Maryland (U.S.) court. It is up to his lawyers to make the case that his affidavit, though sworn at a court abroad, is not rendered invalid by that fact. While mine is a layman’s view, one knows that many legal documents obtained in America (or other countries) are accepted and respected by Nigerian institutions. As for Peter Obi, Iwu would have a hard time explaining why his commission chose to foreclose the governorship run of a man whose case is still active in the courts.

Whether Iwu admits it or not, Nnamdi (Andy) Uba and the ruling PDP stand as beneficiaries of the commission’s weeding plan. If proof were needed that the commission is tethered to the presidency and aligned with the designs of the ruling party, its clearance of Uba should more than suffice. All indications are that Uba apparently misled the commission, as he has misled the Nigerian public, about his academic credentials. In his campaign website and other promotional literature, Uba identifies himself as a holder of a PhD. Yet, thanks to the investigative genius of Sowore Omoyele of www.saharareporters.com, it is now a matter of public record that the PDP’s candidate never earned even a first

degree. His doctorate, allegedly awarded by Buxton University in the UK, is in reality a phantom. Buxton University is an online business whose specialty is to “award” unearned degrees to any poseur able to pay the requisite fees.

What explains Iwu’s reluctance to address the discrepancy between Uba’s educational claims and the humbler actuality that he may hold only a secondary school certificate? True, the constitution prescribes completion of secondary school as the minimum qualification to be met by any gubernatorial candidate. By that constitutional measure, Uba has every right to present himself. But a man who passes himself off as something he is not, even seeking to burnish his campaign with the perception that he is highly educated, should be shown the red card—and escorted off the gubernatorial field.

Sadly, Iwu may have deep psychological handicaps when it comes to dealing with Uba’s certificate fiasco. As Sowore Omoyele reported a month ago, Iwu apparently used a questionable first degree from a Cameroonian university to secure admission to study pharmacy at the University of Bradford.

By threatening to eject Obi and Ngige, Iwu’s commission has abandoned the role of impartial umpire. It is now playing ill-disguised rigger, one eager to use exceptionable means to clear the field of every single credible candidate, and some weak ones to boot. The intended result is to enable Uba to claim the gubernatorial prize with hardly a contest. Iwu’s objective to bar Obi and Ngige but permit Uba to remain in the running is, short and simply, perfidious.

What to do? I have suggested before that the National Assembly should fire Iwu. The man has inspired little confidence that he knows what he's doing, or that he wishes to do the right thing. He has left the impression of being servile to the president, partial to the ruling party, and willing to make baffling choices. Had the legislature removed him, they might have done him a favor: enabling him to retain some measure of moral capital. It may well be too late to send him away, which presents him with a choice. He must now proceed either to confirm the nation's worst fears, or (at the last moment) find the inner strength to avoid a complete loss of integrity. How he steers on Uba will give us a gauge of his moral fiber, or lack of it.

Even so, the electoral commission is far from the only public institution apparently intent on shoring up the travesty of an Uba coronation. A month ago, a Mr. Greg Ikemefuna sued Uba at an Abuja high court praying that the candidate be disqualified from seeking office on the ground that he made false claims about his academic accomplishments. First, the Nigerian media have maintained a curious, inelegant silence on the case, and on other unflattering exposes about Uba.

As if media neglect were not perturbing enough, Justice Roseline Ukeje, chief judge of the Abuja high courts, turned the case into something of a bizarre judicial football. Wresting the case from Justice Anuri Chukwukere, Ukeje then assigned it to Justice Binta Murtala-Nyako, a woman whose husband, Murtala Nyako, is the ruling party's gubernatorial candidate in Adamawa State.

As I write, there are reports that a third judge may have been asked to take up the case. The nation's judicial commission ought to examine the propriety of Ukeje's reassignment of the case. Was it informed by innocuous administrative considerations or driven by more personally vested calculations? Is it at all true that Ukeje's son, named Uche, works on the Uba campaign? At a time when some judges appear to be awakening to the bench's sacred constitutional mandate, enlightened citizens ought to insist that the Ubas of Nigeria never get a helping hand to subvert the cause of justice.

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Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

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